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ABSTRACT

The author describes her activities and accomplishments during a fellowship tenure and provides an assessment of the effect of the scholarship policy on her achievements. She concentrated on adult basic education (ABE) programs, literature, and research. Activities included participation in a workshop in adult basic education, and in meetings of the Illinois Adult Education Roundtable; and interviewing educators in adult basic education. She compiled and read about 35 titles which covered the field of ABE. Participation in research involved the designing of two pilot studies, one dealing with the evaluation of mental abilities in semi-illiterate adults; the other with the use of operant conditioning and money reinforcements in teaching adults. The research fellowship was invaluable to her, and the lack of restrictions placed upon activities allowed her to sample a variety of useful experiences. (PT)

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FINAL REPORT

POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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September, 1970

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE

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Final Report

Postdoctoral Fellowship in Educational Research, 1969/70

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DESCRIPTION OF FELLOWSHIP ACTIVITIES

1. Subject-matter area.

I concentrated on adult basic education programs, literature, and research. My choice of this area was predicated on my interest and research experience with age and other individual differences in the motivational and learning characteristics of both human and animals. As my experience with educational applications of these relationships was minimal, I familiarized myself with theoretical approaches to adult basic education as well as the structure and curricula provided for it. I also examined the roles of educational administrators, counselors, and teachers and their relationships with adult students. In as much as my primary interest was in functionally illiterate students, I focused on the demographic attributes of these persons, their learning capacities, motivations for learning and other behaviors, in and out of the classroom. The instructional materials, teaching techniques, and methods of evaluating student progress were also of concern to me. I observed directly the adult basic education programs in Illinois although I read extensively about similar programs in other areas. To accomplish my goals, I pursued a number of specific activities which I will describe next.

2. Specific activities.

a. Participation in a Workshop in Adult Basic Education, Northern Illinois University, De Kalb, Illinois, July, 1969: I attended a two-week workshop for Illinois administrators, teachers, and counselors. The workshop included guest lecturers, discussion groups, field trips to ABE classes. A variety of instructional and evaluation materials were available for study.

b. Participation in meetings of the Illinois Adult Education Roundtable: I attended monthly meetings of an organization whose purposes are to disseminate information and encourage personal contacts among adult educators throughout Illinois. At the monthly meetings guest speakers presented materials of topical interest to members followed by panel and group discussions.

c. Interviews with educators in adult basic education: During my fellowship tenure, I talked with many administrators, consultants, and teachers who were actively involved in the field. We discussed their views of the problems, possible solutions, and research needs in ABE. A few of the persons I interviewed are Dr. Weldon Bratmueller; Department of Elementary Education, Northern Illinois University; Mr. Robert Stone, co-ordinator, U.S. Department of Labor Training Program for the Unskilled; Mr. Thomas Mann, Assistant Superintendent, Division of Continuing Education; Mr. J. Clark Esary, Director, Adult Basic Education; Mr. Keith Lape, Assistant Director, Adult Basic Education, all of the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, State of Illinois; and Dr. Herbert Lehmann, Assistant Superintendent, Chicago Board of Education.

d. Preparation of an adult basic education bibliography: I

compiled and read approximately thirty-five titles which seemed to cover most comprehensively the field of ABE and related areas.

e. Research participation: I designed two pilot studies, one dealing with the evaluations of mental abilities in semi-illiterate adults the other with the use of operant conditioning and money reinforcements in teaching reading to adults. The first project developed from my observations that very little is known about the concepts and reasoning processes used by functionally illiterate adults. Since no adequate tests are available to assess the nemtal abilities of these individuals, predictions of their capacities for academic achievement are very difficult to make. I developed a series of laboratory-type learning tasks on which subjects responded to objects already familiar to them. The subjects were asked to recognize, organize, and retain information about the test materials in ways which permitted analyses of the concepts and problem-solving strategies they bring to the learning situation. The preliminary findings suggested that the ideas and reasoning processes which characterize some functionally-illiterate adults differ vastly from those exhibited by literate, middle-class adults. The potential value of this research is that understanding the thought processes of these students seems critical to the success of ABE programs.

The second project on which I did preliminary work was concerned with the feasility of using immediate, extrinsic rewards to encourage learning by ABE students. This approach stems from findings that the usual incentives for learning have relatively little appeal for many of these students. Extrinsic incentives and operant conditioning procedures (also called behavior modification techniques) are used extensively and successfully, to encourage learning in children. They are implicit in many welfare programs and in some ABE programs, such as those in Florida, which pay students to participate. The general outcome of this project was that certain adult students learn far more when they they are paid immediately for each correct response than when they are praised by the teacher. These procedures may have considerable value in reaching learners for whom more traditional incentives are meaningless. I am planning long-term work on both these projects.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conclusions.

My fellowship experience has been invaluable in allowing me an opportunity to familiarize myself with a new field of research. It gave me the chance to apply my training and experience in experimental psychology to a different, but equally interesting class of research problems. The research issues I encountered were challenging from a methodological viewpoint. They had the additional value of providing ways to test concepts derived form laboratory research to applied and difficult problems in adult education.

The fellowship has changed my overt behavior too. First, I am teaching for the first time, undergraduate courses in educational

research. I hope my efforts will encourage more potential teachers to look at education from a research point of view. Secondly, I present educational research problems in my courses in statistics and experimental psychology. Perhaps my approach will attract more students with an interest in the behavioral science to careers in educational research. At the moment, student interest in these problems appears high. Finally, I am pursuing the research projects I initiated during my fellowship. I anticipate conducting long-term research on problems in adult basic education. In addition, I am directing research on 1) the use of behavior modification procedures with retarded persons living in the community and 2) classroom behaviors of students in relation to verbal behaviors of teachers.

The real test of the value of my fellowship is my future contribution to educational research. I appreciate having the fellowship and I intend to meet the obligation I feel for having received it by doing credable research on educational problems.

2. Recommendations.

The lack of restrictions placed upon fellowhip activities was most appealing to me as it gave me the opportunity to sample a variety of useful experiences I hadn't anticipated at the outset. I am not convinced that a highly structured program is essential to the development of educational researchers at the postdoctoral level. Structured programs could prevent the fellow from applying his skills and information imaginatively to the research problems confronting him.

The level of research in adult basic education is low and methodologically poor. In fact, it is almost nonexistent. The educational personnel I meet were highly cooperative with my research plans and seemed genuinely glad to assist in almost any kind of project. The lack of research in this area seems to result from shortages of time and personnel to perform the necessary evaluations. The classroom teachers I met impressed me for their creativity in selecting instructional materials and methods of teaching as well as for their genuine interest in aiding students. However, they were totally unequipped to perform research in addition to their heavy teaching responsibilities. If students and programs in adult basic education are to be researched at all, I believe outside personnel must be recruited.

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